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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TOKYO 002553

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SUBJECT: FORMER SWEDISH DPRK AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES NORTH
KOREAN REGIME, POLITICS

Classified By: Ambassador J. Thomas Schieffer. Reasons 1.4 (B) (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. DPRK foreign ministry officials appeared "tense" as a result of Pyongyang's 2006 missile and nuclear tests, former Swedish Ambassador to North Korea Paul Beijer told Embassy Tokyo Political Minister Counselor on June 4. Beijer judged the North Korean military to be in poor condition, a situation that forced the regime to develop weapons of mass destruction. Civil institutions, according to Beijer, fared even worse - doctors often handled relatively minor conditions in extreme fashion, e.g., treating a broken leg by amputation. DPRK officials have decentralized decision-making, Beijer observed, and Kim Jong-il's authority has been weakened. The DPRK power structure was increasingly being divided not along military vs. party lines, but between younger vs. older generations, he claimed. End Summary.

¶2. (C) On June 4, Special Advisor to the Swedish Government on the Korean Peninsula Ambassador Paul Beijer reviewed recent developments in North Korea with Embassy Tokyo Political Minister Counselor. Beijer, who served as Sweden's ambassador to the DPRK from 2001-05, stayed three days in Tokyo following visits to Pyongyang (May 23-25), Beijing, and Seoul. Beijer plans to visit New York (June 6-9) and Washington, D.C. (June 10-13), where he will meet with NSC, State, and Defense Department officials.

Tension within MFA

¶3. (C) Beijer described DPRK officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) as being "tense," a result of what he believes to be the foreign ministry's increasing isolation within the North Korean bureaucracy following Pyongyang's 2006 missile and nuclear tests. The PRC's decision to vote in favor of UNSCR 1718 came as a "real shock" to the Kim regime. MFA had since been working to repair the North's relationship with the international community.

Military Malaise

14. (C) North Korean military infrastructure appeared to be in a state of disrepair, Beijer said. While noting that DPRK Special Forces were "supposed to be good," international aid workers moving about the North Korean countryside, many of whom had military experience, had "not been impressed" with the overall condition of the DPRK regular armed forces. Beijer heard the North had moved 75%-85% of its forces to the DMZ border, a move he speculated had been intended to keep the U.S. and South Korea guessing as to Pyongyang's intentions. The former Swedish Ambassador concluded that the North had been forced to devote resources to the development of WMD because its conventional military forces were not likely to be effective against a modern army.

Civil and Medical Malaise

15. (C) Civil institutions, according to Beijer, showed signs of decay as well. The economy, which had been in "a slide since the 1970's," began a "free fall" following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The DPRK health system was "hollow," and access to medicines imported from China and Russia could only be bought using hard currency. Medical resources are in such a low state that doctors were forced to deal with relatively minor conditions in extreme fashion, e.g., amputating broken legs, Beijer stated. In addition to problems with the medical system, ordinary citizens "did not look well fed," and roads and other infrastructure were in disrepair.

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U.S. Engagement

6 (C) In Beijer's view, North Korea is focused on repairing and developing its relationship with the United States. Noting that he had been in Pyongyang in October 2002 when DPRK officials verified the existence of their Highly Enriched Uranium (HEU) program with former A/S Kelly, Beijer opined that the DPRK admission had been a calculated step aimed at "engaging" or "energizing" the U.S.-DPRK relationship.

Kim Symbolic Figure

17. (C) DPRK officials have decentralized decision-making, Beijer observed, and Kim Jong-il's authority has been weakened. Beijer questioned why Kim would have delayed the critical task of selecting a successor for so long. The DPRK leader's failure to anoint a successor provided clear indication that Kim was no longer that strong. There appeared to be no "guiding intelligence" across the larger government bureaucracy - individual ministries and factions often worked in uncoordinated fashion or at cross purposes. As a result, Beijer wondered if Kim had become something of a symbolic figure.

18. (C) Beijer offered that problems with decentralized authority and Kim's weakened status might lead to a collapse of the dynasty when Kim dies. Increasingly, DPRK leaders would need to balance the nuclear strategy with the country's growing economic needs. Those economic issues would, in Beijer's view, force North Korea to keep coming back to the nuclear negotiating table.

Young Generation Key

19. (C) Beijer observed that the DPRK power structure was increasingly being divided not along military vs. party lines, but between younger vs. older generations. He remarked wryly that he could tell just by looking at the North Korean official he was to meet with how the meeting would go: under 40 relaxed and productive; over 50 or 55 hardline and unbending. Younger generation officials, he noted, will "play the game" and go along with the traditional party line. However, Beijer said he often talked to younger leaders about issues, and would then see indications six months later that they were listening to what he had said. The old generation would need to die off before change would be realized in the DPRK, he speculated. In that regard, Sweden sponsored 50-100 North Korean exchange visitors annually, giving priority to areas that would contribute to economic reform, such as business and accounting. Beijer estimated that close to 1,000 North Korean experts and specialists had participated in the program. While Sweden has suspended the program after the DPRK nuclear test, Beijer says he, for one, supports starting it up again.

SCHIEFFER